

LONDON SUNDAY TIMES
26 April 1964

THE SPY TRADE

INSIGHT traces the step-by-step story of the cloak-and-dagger bargainings that led to the first deal between the Russian and American governments for an exchange of captured spies

In the best traditions of diplomatic doubletalk, Russian and Britain each swear the other side made first move towards the Wynne-Lonsdale exchange. A thick official fog shrouds the actual negotiations which led to the swap on the Heer Strasse. But, coincidentally, James B. Donovan has just told in America the first full account of his nerve-racking week's bargaining in East Berlin which secured the Abel-Powers exchange. He sharply illuminates the conspiratorial techniques which govern such deals, and the thickly theatrical atmosphere in which they are conducted—and there is an immediate parallel between his story and the Wynne-Lonsdale swap. In both cases, the Russians achieved the same objective: they retrieved a lost master-spy by adroit manipulation of pawns. Already, there is some evidence that the actual tempo of the negotiations was similar—the Russians using their "hot-and-cold" technique again.

DONOVAN'S STORY, recreated from his diaries and reports, tells how he played a remarkable two-handed game with the Russians and East Germans, ostensibly independent but in fact collaborating in an attempt to confuse him. In the end he freed two other Americans, one from East Germany, one from Russia, as well as the U.2 pilot.

Donovan, a Catholic, is a well-known American lawyer who was a Nuremberg prosecutor and was in the O.S.S. as a defended Abel at his trial in 1957. Abel got 30 years—while serving sentence was awarded censored correspondence with his family in East Germany. The U.S. intelligence men thought the family, in fact, a group of Soviet agents. In May, 1960, Powers shed his U.2 near Sverdlovsk, and the Russians gave him a 10-year sentence. Immediately, there was talk of an exchange in America—but, as the Wynne case, neither government coveted the other of the initiative. It was a year later, according to Donovan, that Abel's "wife" wrote to his office suggesting an exchange. It took the U.S. government another seven months to decide. On Tuesday, January 11, 1962, Donovan, then 45, was summoned to Washington: it had been decided "on the high level" that the deal was in the national interest. Would

Donovan go to East Germany to fix it?

Immediately Donovan cabled from Washington to Frau Helen Abel in Leipzig, East Germany. There had been "significant developments," he said, and concluded: "My proposal is that I meet you at the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin on Saturday, February 3 at 12 noon. It is imperative that no publicity be given this meeting. . . . Accordingly, if the foregoing meeting is satisfactory, please cable my law office only the message Happy New Year." Donovan was obviously right in the spirit of secret service work.

He now asked for a letter to guarantee the U.S. Government's intentions to the Russians, and late in the afternoon received this, on Department of Justice paper:

Dear Mr Donovan,

With respect to the recent conference with you regarding executive clemency for your client, this is to assure you that upon the fulfillment of circumstances as outlined, the reason set forth in the letter to your client's wife as to why executive clemency should not be considered, will no longer exist.

Sincerely yours,

Reed Cozart,

Pardon Attorney.

It was too cautious, said Donovan. But already the determination of the U.S. and the Soviet Governments was clear: they were going to avoid actual contact with each other as far as they could. Donovan was told it was all he would get.

Donovan's diary entry for Thursday, January 25, was brief: "This morning at 10 o'clock I received at my law office a cablegram from Berlin which read HAPPY NEW YEAR and was signed HELEN." On the Saturday, January 27, his entry began in a Buchan-esque vein: "I took a cab to the Harvard Club to meet a Washington contact for my final briefing. . . ."

The contact brought two new names into the story. One was now holding Frederick L. Pryor, a Yale student, on espionage

charges. Before the Wall went up Pryor had been doing Ph.D. research on trade behind the Iron Curtain, and had apparently dug rather too deep. The public prosecutor was demanding death—in the hope, apparently, that U.S. public opinion would demand diplomatic recognition of East Germany, so that moves might be made to save Pryor's life. Donovan was also told that Marvin Makinen, a University of Pennsylvania student, had been given eight years in Russia for photographing military establishments.

There was an East German lawyer, the contact went on, called Vogel, who claimed to represent the Abel and the (American) Pryor families. This man had just sent a message to the U.S. Mission in West Berlin: Mrs Abel was sure that Pryor and Makinen would be freed with Powers if the U.S. returned Abel. Your basic mission, Donovan was told, is to swap Abel for Powers—as for the rest, play it by ear. "I resolved," says Donovan, "to try for all." The contact said Donovan would not have any American diplomat with him on visits to East Berlin. It would be too embarrassing if anything went wrong. "Your situation is very different. There could be no embarrassment since you will have no official status."

Donovan asked if he should carry a weapon, or any recording gear. He was told not to, but if this detracted at all from the Fleming-like element of his story, his arrival in London by Pan Am on Tuesday, January 30, made up somewhat. He booked straight into Claridges and was soon met by "a young, very competent" Mr White, who alerted him to leave for Berlin next Friday, and told him his name in London would be "Mr Dennis." "Then he gave me some West German marks, and I gave him a morning bracer of Claridges' brandy."

Friday was February 2, and Donovan checked out of Claridges before dawn. In Connaught Square "we picked up a young lady representing British security" and drove to a U.S. air base where the British girl left them. It was snowing heavily when the U.S.A.F. plane skidded into Tempelhof to be met by "an American named Bob, who had a small automobile parked nearby." Nobody objected when they drove away without any formalities. Bob, "tall, good-looking, around 30, with dark hair," drove Donovan to a darkened

private house in Berlin. "You'll live here alone," Bob said. "Every morning a safe German maid will come, fix your breakfast and make the bed upstairs. . . . You'll find everything. . . . American cigarettes, twelve-year Scotch, current magazines."

After dinner, "Bob" drove Donovan to the Berlin Hilton and showed him the dim-lit Golden City Bar. After each foray into East Berlin, Donovan was to call him from the Golden City at an unlisted number, which he was to memorise. The number would be manned, night and day, while the operation ran. Clearly, a little bit

of Len Deighton—but the next day the mood changed, and became more like The Spy Who Came in from the Cold.

On Saturday, February 3, Donovan woke to a sleet-filled day with "a cold in my back which felt like pleurisy." At 11.15 he entered the Zoo station in West Berlin, bought a round-trip ticket ("for good luck") and took the twenty-minute ride to Friedrichstrasse in East Berlin. He was to "use his discretion" in getting past the guards—at that time visitors were sometimes let through, sometimes not.

Donovan got past the first guard, but "when I rounded a corner through a roped corridor I found about 100 people herded in lines and waiting for passport clearance. After ten minutes only one or two persons had been processed for entry and the delay seemed to be deliberate. . . . I left my place in the line and marched up to the nearest Vopo. Gloweringly, I loudly told him in German that I had an appointment at noon at the Soviet Embassy. He clicked his heels and escorted me to the head of the queue. I answered routine questions. . . ."

At the massive Embassy in Unter den Linden Donovan was told to try next door, the Consulate. A bell opened a formidable door to disclose a smiling young woman. "How do you do?" she said. "I am the daughter of Rudolf Abel. This is my mother, Frau Abel, and her cousin Herr Drews."